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AUTHOR Tillson, Lou Davidson
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ABSTRACT

Graduate programs which typically produce college instructors rarely teach "how to teach." There is an instructional tool, however, which is invaluable for developing instructional communication skills: the case method. It can also be an effective means of helping pre-service teachers develop teaching skills. The case method is an innovative instructional strategy that presents participants with a narrative about some topical event or situation that has happened or is likely to happen in a particular environment. Typically, cases depict real world situations and are written with an open ending, which stimulates individual as well as group skill in critical thinking, problem solving, discussion, and decision making. Case studies appropriate for analysis in the instructional communication classroom address a wide range of topics, including diversity, motivation, classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, communication apprehension, student needs, instructional strategies, evaluation, and humor. This instructional strategy compounds the advantages of small group discussion because the topic analyzed is a scenario in which students may find themselves once they leave the protective environment of the classroom. This "safe environment" enables students to process feasible, plausible, and ideal courses of action and their associated ramifications. There are numerous ways for students to prepare for a case discussion. They can read the case in advance while answering study questions; or they can skim in it class. In-class analysis generally begins with students' sharing their responses in a small group. (Contains 33 references.) (TB)

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The Case Method as Reflective and Projective Practice in the Instructional Communication Classroom

by
Lou Davidson Tillson, Ph.D.
Department of Speech Communication and Theatre
Murray State University
Murray, KY 42071
(502)762-4460
e-mail: A58214F@MSUMUSIK.MURSUKY.EDU

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RUNNING HEAD: Cases/Instructional Communication

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The Case Method as Reflective and Projective Practice

in the Instructional Communication Classroom

My first day as a college instructor was a terrifying experience! I joined the department in the middle of the academic year, so the other new instructor had long since forgotten the anxiety of his first day. His advice was basic - "Here's the syllabus, there's the grade book, show no fear."

No fear??? How could I not be afraid? I had never done this before, and I was supposed to be an "expert." I walked into the classroom a couple of minutes before the class was scheduled to begin. All eyes were on me as I leaned on the podium and opened my mouth to speak. I realized too late that my mouth was so dry that my tongue was stuck to the roof. I couldn't speak, or smile, or move; all I could do was stand there holding onto the podium for dear life! When I finally found my voice, I got through the housekeeping chores as quickly as possible and let the class go. I returned to my office, closed the door, and sat at my desk shaking, trying to figure out why I ever wanted to teach in the first place. I realized I needed to change my strategy to survive the rest of the semester and to justify my career choice. (Tillson, Chipps, Chaudoin, Miller, Shultz, Wagner, Yastremski, 1995)

The preceding scenario illustrates many individuals' reaction to entering the classroom for the first time as "THE TEACHER." Unfortunately, this scenario is only the first of many negative experiences new instructors are likely to encounter in the early days (months, semesters...) of their teaching careers. New teachers frequently lack the communication skills necessary to be successful on the job. Teacher education programs, which produce K-12 instructors, do not routinely teach classroom communication skills. Graduate programs which typically produce college/university instructors rarely teach these future faculty members **how** to teach. One study,

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conducted at Ohio State University revealed that 62.5% of the new faculty there had no formal coursework on teaching and 51.2% had not even attended a workshop on teaching skills (Stanley & Chism, 1991). This lack of training in the "art of teaching" places novice instructors in a precarious position. "Teaching is risky, especially to new faculty, because it forces them to demonstrate a competency for which they have had no training" (Bess, 1982, p. 102). Unfortunately, the general assumption is that anyone with a master's degree or a doctorate can teach. After all, they have an advanced degree...

Lee S. Shulman, in his remarks before the 1989 National Conference of the American Association of Higher Education, placed the importance of developing pedagogical skills (instructional communication skills) for college instructors in perspective:

> Future teachers are, I must remind you, not just those who are going to be in K-12. Future teachers are those whom you see as your best students, whom you dream will get a PhD and then do what? Teach. And they are those who are going to go into business and industry and will spend a great deal of their time mentoring other people in their work places as teachers; they too, are in the midst of a teaching environment. If we don't meet this challenge of taking the pedagogy seriously, I fear that fifty years from now people will look back on our era as the period in the late 1980s and early 1990s when we had the opportunity in less than a decade to educate two-thirds of the teachers who would teach for the next thirty-five years, the period when we had this extraordinary opportunity to make a difference in education. (Diamond & Wilbur, 1990, p. 214)

I have the good fortune to teach for an institution which values teacher training courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. I teach COM 372: Communication in the Educational Environment, a required course for all secondary education majors. I also teach COM 672: Communication in the Instructional Environment, a required course for all graduate teaching assistants in the Speech Communication and Theatre

department. In preparation for these two classes, I discovered an instructional tool which I believe is invaluable for developing instructional communication skills: the case method. This paper will discuss the merits of using the case method in the instructional communication classroom as a pedagogical tool to reduce teaching anxiety and to develop teachers' instructional skills and strategies. Specifically, this paper will:

- define the case method,
- provide a rationale for its inclusion in the instructional communication course,
- suggest strategies for implementation,
- list case selection criteria,
- identify sources for appropriate cases, and
- provide a supplemental reading list.

THE CASE METHOD DEFINED

Instructors have employed this thought-provoking method for many years in business classes, law schools and medical colleges (Tillson & Wagner, 1995). In recent years, the case method has been introduced in a variety of communication classes (Small Group Communication: Cragan & Wright, 1991; Organizational Communication: Kreps & Lederman, 1985; Peterson, 1984; Sypher, 1990; Public Speaking: Tillson, 1995; Interpersonal Communication: Veenendall & Feinstein, 1990). Specifically, the case method is an innovative instructional strategy which presents participants with a narrative about some topical event or situation which has happened or is likely to happen in a particular environment. Traditionally, cases depict "real world" situations and are written with an open ending which stimulates individual, as well as, group skill in critical thinking, problem solving, discussion, and decision making. Case studies appropriate for analysis in the instructional communication classroom address a wide range of topics including, but not limited to: diversity, motivation, classroom climate,

teacher-student relationships, communication apprehension, student needs, instructional strategies, evaluation, humor, etc. (see appendix for sample cases).

RATIONALE FOR INCLUSION

Instructional communication courses should employ the case method because it stimulates critical thinking and expression of ideas. This instructional strategy compounds the advantages of small group discussion because the topic analyzed is a scenario in which students may find themselves once they leave the protective environment of the classroom. This "safe environment" enables students to process feasible, plausible, and ideal courses of action and their associated ramifications. As a result, students are able to apply various solutions to problems without being committed to any one in particular. This analytical process facilitates the development of a reservoir of knowledge and an arsenal of instructional techniques. Additional benefits include enhanced group cooperation, valuation of other's ideas, presentation of multiple causes of, and solutions to, problems, application of theories to real-world situations, and increase in affect for course and instructor (Tillson & Wagner, 1995).

Students consistently report that they like the case method of instruction. They indicate that cases are like stories or movies which tend to stick in their mind and, thus, are easily recalled for examinations or, more importantly, when they actually face similar situations. Students also indicate that the technique allows them to break out of the passive role of information receiver and become actively involved in their own learning. Shanker (1990) describes the need for this type of student involvement in the classroom:

> No matter what the root meaning of the word *educate* is, no one can *educate you*. You must talk, you must read, you must imagine, you must build, you must listen. Merely being present as someone else tries to pour something into you does not mean that you are learning. You must be actively engaged. (p. 349).

Graduate and undergraduate students claim that the case method enables them to be actively engaged in their own learning. It does so by providing them with the opportunity to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills as they make logical connections between theory and practice. In the words of one student:

> The case method is very effective because it seems as close to the real thing as we can get without actually living the situation. The case study has some advantages over actually being there because it allows us to look at a problem from several perspectives and provide several possible solutions. In real life you usually only get one shot. I would suggest continuing this kind of exercise. (Jay Kaufman, COM 372 student)

Finally, the case method should be incorporated in instructional communication courses because it develops pre-service teachers' communication skills, and it models an instructional strategy with which pre-service teachers might be unfamiliar. Participating in case discussions as a student may encourage new teachers to incorporate the method in their own classrooms. Unfortunately, many teachers in training think all they need to do is master their content area and they will be prepared to teach their students the same subject. Most will probably employ the traditional lecture method - and wonder why their students are bored and unable to apply what they've learned. Bligh (1971) claims that although lecturing enables the teacher to "transmit" information, it is not very effective in promoting independent thought or developing students' thinking skills. Educational consultant George Leonard describes the inadequacy of the lecture method by calling it "the best way to get information from the teacher's notebook to the student's notebook without touching the student's mind" (Chiaramonte, 1994, p.1). As communication educators, we know that "effective teaching requires more than information dissemination from a central source" (Kearney, 1984, p. 95).

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

There are numerous ways for students to prepare for a case discussion. Students

can read the case before class, with or without study questions. They can skim it quickly in class or listen to a synopsis of it prior to being handed the written copy. Participants can discuss the case in small groups or with the entire class. Typically, if students are going to have a thoughtful discussion, they need to have read and "digested" the case before the class meets to discuss it. For it to be perceived as relevant, students also need to understand the broad issues or themes which are pertinent to the case. In some instances, participants may need to seek information from additional sources (textbooks, other course materials, journals, newspapers, etc.). Once students have read and processed the case, a written analysis may be required addressing the following:

1. Who are the main characters? What do you know about them? Where does the case take place?
2. What problems are evident? What exacerbates those problems? Are there any causal relationships?
3. What solutions can be identified? What are the advantages and disadvantages to those solutions?
4. What is the best solution? Why? (Justify your choice).
5. How can specific course concepts/theories be applied to the case?

In-class analysis typically begins with individuals sharing their responses in small group discussions where they try to reach consensus and wrestle with some new issue or angle of the case. At the end of the small group discussion, the class as a whole participates in a "pull-out session." Mitigating factors are usually thrown in at this time to further enhance students' critical thinking skills (i.e., how would "what if" clauses change/modify solutions?). Board outlines are used to organize student comments. At the conclusion of the case discussion, students are asked to identify key learning points. This step of the analysis is vital if students are to share understanding. It is also a good strategy for ascertaining if students have accomplished the teacher's objectives for the activity.

The power of the case method lies in the reflection, projection, and transference that occurs. This approach enables students to almost anonymously share their own feelings and fears about teaching by transferring them to the instructors/students in the cases. Students are able to project themselves into the teacher's role, without revealing that image to their classmates. Collectively, they are given the opportunity to vicariously experience a variety of "worst case scenarios." This surrogate experience serves as an inoculation against "bad teaching" because it enables students to identify what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how to prevent it from going wrong in their own classrooms. They are able to reach conclusions on their own that are much more meaningful than a dry (or even an entertaining) lecture about classroom management or teacher/student relationships (Tillson, 1995). Staton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979) indicated that the same learning which occurs from direct experience can also occur on a vicarious basis from observing others. Additionally, they argue that "new responses may be learned or behavior may be changed from simply observing the behavior of others without the observer enacting any behaviors or receiving any reinforcement" (p. 203-204). The case method is, arguably, an observational experience, albeit one in which students visualize the event via a written description of it.

CONCLUSION

Teaching has been recognized as an isolated endeavor in that teachers rarely talk with other teachers about what they actually do in the classroom. A current movement in faculty resource development aims to engage experienced teachers in reflection (i.e., discussion about their teaching activities) through an objective, case analysis. While reflection is good practice for veteran teachers, it is not likely to meet the needs of pre-service or even novice instructors. Facilitating discussion about classroom-based case studies enables future teachers to project themselves into a variety of instructional challenges and opportunities without incriminating themselves in the process. By implementing this method in instructional communication courses, teachers in training

are able to project case problems/solutions to their own classes and reach conclusions about successful teaching practices that are more readily internalized than academic lectures which fail to facilitate active learning.

Former students summarize the benefits of the case method in the instructional communication classroom:

> The case study allows you to look at the situation from all sides more objectively than if you were in such a situation yourself...I believe that the case study is, in a sense, a 'hands-on' method of learning because it requires an application of the concepts being discussed rather than rote memorization. It also allows the student to think of what he or she would do in such a 'real-life' situation.

CASE SELECTION CRITERIA

Case studies are easy to find. Appropriate cases studies, or those which address a specific concept are not so readily accessible. Instructors may have to create their own! Chiaramonte (1994, p. 2) lists ten questions that should be answered when selecting a particular case for classroom use:

1. Is it a true case? A true case is a record of an actual decision that has been faced. Hypothetical cases are rarely as effective.
2. Is there a decision-making dilemma? Easy or obvious decisions make for lousy cases. The best require rigorous evaluation to determine their effectiveness.
3. Does the case tell a good story? Like all good stories, good cases must have an interesting plot. There must be drama, suspense & an issue worth investigating.
4. Are there sufficient details? The case should provide enough relevant information for students to identify with the situation and to empathize with the central characters.
5. Is it written clearly and coherently? Specific names, dates, times, and amounts should be used. It should be written in plain English. Optimum length is 12 p.
6. Are there descriptive sub-titles? Outlining by sub-titles gives students an idea of the flow of the case, and it sets a framework within which data can be assessed. Analysis and interpretation will be more orderly.
7. Does it teach the skills you want? The best cases teach students decision-making processes that can be applied to other cases and other subjects.
8. Are assignment questions suggested by the case? The instructor should be able to identify key questions generated by the facts of the case.
9. How well does the case "age?" The relevance of a case may change with time. Even the best case may need polishing if it contains worn and outdated language.
10. Does the case suggest additional courses or uses? Potential uses of the case might identify other courses or topic areas for discussion.

SOURCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL COMMUNICATION CASES

- **McGraw-Hill, Primis Division**
  1-800-962-9342

  A free catalog with brief descriptions of 48 cases is available.
  Free teaching notes/case book are tailored for your class and provided to you when texts are ordered. May include notes/handouts, etc. from the teacher.
  TOPICS: wide range including diversity, motivation, organizational climate, small groups, teacher-student relationships, expectations, communication apprehension, student needs, etc.; Public school examples, grades K-12

- **Pace University Center for Case Studies in Education**
  School of Education, ATTN: William Welty or Rita Silverman
  78 North Broadway
  White Plains, NY 10603
  (914)422-4366

  Free cases available (FIPSE grant). Reproduction rights provided.
  TOPICS: sensitivity, relationships, inappropriate humor, evaluation, diversity, perception, instructional practices, etc.; College examples

- **Roderick MacDougall Center for Case Development and Teaching**
  Dr. Kay Merseth, Director
  451 Gutman Library
  Harvard Graduate School of Education
  6 Appian Way
  Cambridge, MA 02138
  (617)496-3785

  Catalog available, Cases cost $2.00 each
  TOPICS: K-12 cases in community and local politics, curriculum and instruction, communication, legal advice, etc.

- **Contemporary films as case studies.**
  The Breakfast Club, Teachers, Stand and Deliver, Dead Poet's Society, Mr. Holland's Opus, Dangerous Minds, Lean on Me

- Greenwood, Gordon, Parkay (1989). **Case Studies for Teacher Decision-Making.** New York: Random House.

- Henson, Kowlaski, & Weaver. (1990). **Case Studies on Teaching.** NY: Longman

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